

John and Priscilla Alden's story is an enduring one

Pilgrims' love has inspired poets and historians

By Stephen A. Shepherd
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"John Alden was hired for a cooper at Southampton, where the ship victualled; and being a hopeful young man was much desired, but left to his own liking to go or stay when he came here; but he stayed, and married here."

William Bradford
Of Plymouth Plantation, 1646

John Alden did, indeed, stay with the Pilgrims in Plymouth. He married Priscilla Mullins, whose parents and brother died during the colony's first winter, and moved to Duxbury a few years later.

But if Gov. William Bradford knew the true facts of Pilgrim America's most-celebrated romance, he never recorded them for history.

Nearly every schoolchild knows the story about how Pilgrim military leader Myles Standish sent young John Alden to ask for Priscilla's hand in marriage on behalf of Standish.

"Speak for yourself, John," was her now-famous reply, at least according to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in his poem *The Courtship of Myles Standish*.

Little is actually known about their years together, but the story of John and Priscilla endures. And nowhere is it more alive than in Duxbury, where the house in which the Aldens lived still stands on a hill near the Blue Fish River.

It is the only house in existence that was built by a Pilgrim, lived in by a Pilgrim and in which a Pilgrim died. It is still maintained by John and Priscilla's descendants, the Alden Kindred of America.

John Alden was barely 21 when he was hired

to take care of beer and water casks on the *Mayflower*.

It is generally held that the marriage of John and Priscilla was the second to take place in the colony, probably sometime after May 1621.

In 1627, Alden was among the "Undertakers," a group of men who assumed responsibility on behalf of the colony to buy out its financial backers, the Merchant Adventurers of London. Later that year, John Alden participated in a division of land whereby he gained 100 acres of farmland in what was to become Duxbury.

The Alden farmstead sat in the area now bordered by St. George Street, Route 3A and the Blue Fish River, nearly all the way to Harrison Street on the south.

For a few years, Alden, his wife and probably at least two children came to Duxbury only for the growing season, spending the winter in Plymouth. In 1632, however, Alden, Standish and others who had been spending much of the year in Duxbury received permission to set up permanent residence there.

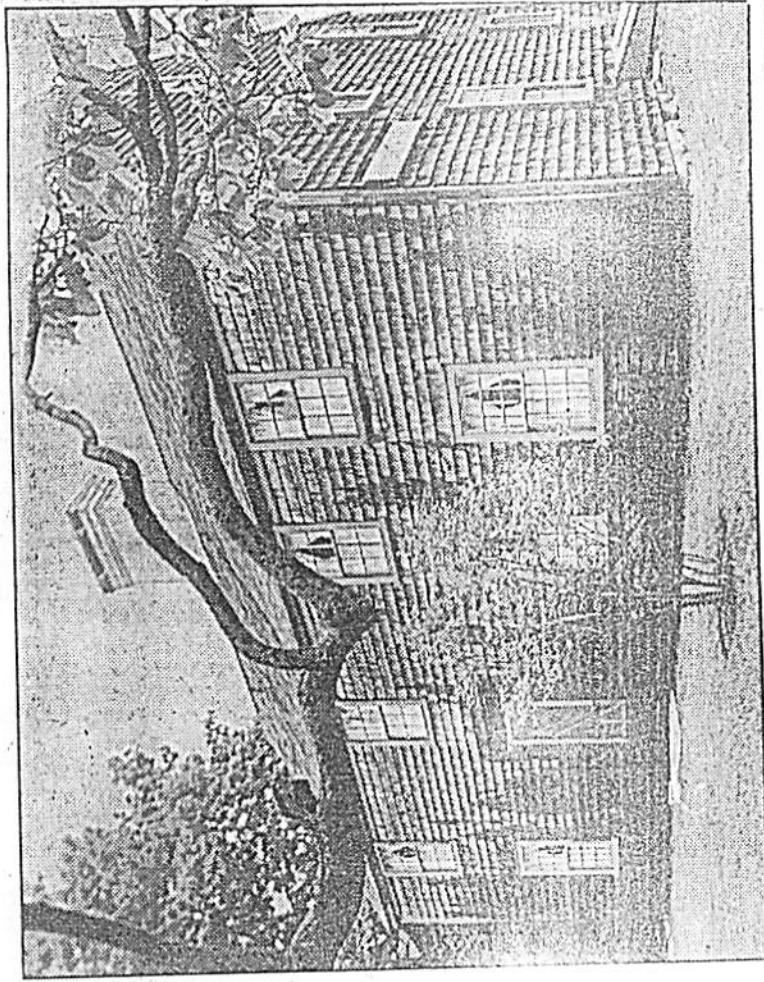
Alden built a long, narrow house on a knoll close to the river.

In 1653, John Alden built a larger house about 300 yards uphill.

Tradition has it that the original, narrow Alden house was moved to the site of the second house and attached to the rear. The kitchen, buttery and burning room are believed to be in the older section of the Alden House.

A simple post-and-rop fence now circles the stone foundation and cellar hole of the original structure, which was excavated by archaeologist Roland Wells Robbins in 1960.

Descendants of John and Priscilla lived in



File photo

The home of John and Priscilla Alden House is the only surviving house where Pilgrims lived and died.

The 1653 house for 10 generations, and the house underwent few structural changes during that time. In 1907, ownership of the ancestral home was taken over by the Alden Kindred of America.

The "great room," which still features a ceiling made of animal hair and ground clam and oyster shells, is open to the public from the last Saturday in June to the day before Labor Day, except Mondays.

The good-sized house is itself evidence of the high position held by John Alden in Pilgrim New England.

His trustworthiness and popularity were

rewarded by positions in community government for more than 55 years under five governors of the colony. At various times, Alden served as governor's assistant, deputy to the General Court, treasurer and deputy governor. He also was a member of committees that reviewed laws, redressed abuses and handled disputes. And he served on the councils of war against the Dutch in the 1620s and 1650s and the Indians in 1675.

John Alden died at Duxbury, presumably in the burning room of his home, on Sept. 22,

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About 30 Duxbury residents are descendants of Aldens

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1687, at the age of 88 or 89. Priscilla died some years before.

The graves of both are in a corner section of Duxbury's Old Burying Ground.

John and Priscilla had 10 or 11 children. Today, about 30 of the Aldens' descendants are living in Duxbury, according to John Alden Keyser, current president of the Alden Kindred of America.

To be a member of the organization, a person must document his or her genealogy to show that he or she is a descendant of John and Priscilla.

Keyser said the Alden Kindred's membership now stands at about 1,000.

Contrary to the snooty image that *Mayflower* descendants may have had in the past, the Alden Kindred is mostly an "informal" group, principally interested in history, Keyser said.

But what about the courtship?

Historians have found verifiable errors in the accounts given by Longfellow and in an earlier version published by Timothy Alden in 1814.

If the story did unfold as legend has it, former Alden Kindred presi-

dent Daniel N. Pearce of Duxbury makes a strong case for why Priscilla Mullins chose John Alden instead of Standish.

Several facts lend support to the notion that Standish was looking for a wife: he had lost his wife when the *Mayflower* was at Provincetown, he had a family and needed a woman at home to take care of the house, cook his meals and take care of him, Pearce points out.

"Captain Standish was a very important man in the colony," Pearce said.

"He was the military leader — a fearless, skilled soldier.

"Physically, he was short, he had red hair, he was bandy or bowlegged and he was about 36, or 16 years older than Priscilla.

"On the other hand, John Alden was single, he had a fair complexion, he was tall and was said to have been a man of most excellent form, and he was about 21 or 22, or about a year older than Priscilla," Pearce said.

Pearce leaves it to the individual to decide whether that is enough evidence that the story is true.

"I know what I think," he says, a wry, but satisfied smile creasing his face.



File photo

The "great room" in the Alden House.